DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 316 914 EA 021 513

AUTHOR	Lake, Sara
TITLE	Exploratory and Elective Courses in the Middle Level School. Practitioner's Monograph #8.
INSTITUTION	California League of Middle Schools, Sacramento.
PUB DATE	Sep 89
NOTE	20p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Publications, California League of Middle Schools, 2401 L Street, Sacramento, CA 95816 ($4.25 prepaid).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	Adolescents; *Discovery Learning; *Elective Courses; Junior High Schools; *Middle Schools; *Student Centered Curriculum; Student Needs; *Transitional Programs
IDENTIFIERS	*California

ABSTRACT

The middle school is a bridge between elementary and secondary schooling that helps students pass from childhood to adolescence. Within the middle school is another bridge--the exploratory/elective program. Whereas the core curriculum focuses on students' academic development and the cocurricular program on their equally important personal and social development, the exploratory/elective program targets both academic and personal growth. The exploratory/elective curriculum allows student choice and supplements core classes instead of replacing them. Subjects most often classified as exploratory are music, art, home economics, and industrial arts. Drama, typing, and foreign languages are other options. Whatever the course offerings, all students should cycle through all courses, the courses should build readiness rather than teach content, and competitive grading should be deemphasized. Electives tend to have a more academic bent, including classes in literature, science, mathematics, and social studies. Electives may build from the exploratory program or derive from expressed student interests or needs. Some electives may have prerequisites limiting student participation or be designed for students in a particular grade. Some may form a skill sequence; others may have a class size ceiling for practical reasons, such as limited facilities or equipment. Two special presentation modes are minicourses and seminars or independent study. Recreation and sports activities may also be merged into the exploratory/elective program. Tips are given for designing effective programs. (41 endnotes) (MLH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED316914

California League of Middle Schools

Practitioner's Monograph #8:

EXPLORATORY AND ELECTIVE COURSES

IN THE

MIDDLE LEVEL SCHOOL

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Carl L. Zon

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

C★L★M★S

1107 Ninth Street, Suite 150
Sacramento, CA ★ 95814 ★ (916) 447-7838

EA 021 513

California League of Middle Schools

Practitioner's Monograph #8:

EXPLORATORY AND ELECTIVE COURSES IN THE MIDDLE LEVEL SCHOOL

by

Sara Lake

September, 1989

Copyright 1989

California League of Middle Schools
2401 L Street
Sacramento, CA 95814
(916) 447-7838

Whenever middle level education is discussed, the word "bridge" seems to occur. The middle level school is itself a bridge, taking students from the elementary to the secondary level of schooling and through the personal transition from childhood to adolescence.

Within the middle level school there is another bridge: the exploratory/elective program. The core curriculum focuses on students' academic development, the cocurricular program on their equally-important personal and social development. The exploratory/elective program forms a bridge--or continuum--between the two, merging academic and personal growth. Some offerings, such as foreign language or science electives, are essentially indistinguishable from core courses in instructional methods and academic emphasis. Other offerings, such as home economics or a minicourse on backpacking, are still regularly-scheduled classes, but they lean toward the avocational, "hands-on" model of the cocurricular program.

The cocurricular program emphasizes student choice--the development and exercise of personal interests. The exploratory/elective program begins to merge choice into the academic program. Unlike the free-form elective models of the 1970s, middle level exploratory/elective curricula in no way replace required core classes which provide all students with equal exposure to knowledge and academic skills. Instead, they supplement core classes with additional special-interest courses open to student choice. (A student might choose, for example, Spanish instead of French or an elective in outdoor education or

Shakespeare.) Thus students are introduced to the practice of academic course selection, which will be a key feature of their high school and college experience.

Because middle level program offerings form a continuum from core through exploratory/elective to cocurricular, it can be difficult to see where one program begins and another leaves off. Some schools include intramural sports and hobby activities in the exploratory/elective program; others assign these to the cocurricular program. At different schools, the same subject (for example, vocal music) might be considered part of the core, the exploratory/elective program, or the cocurricular program. The guidance/advisory program may even be labelled an "elective," albeit a required one.[1] To further complicate the issue, many names are applied to exploratory/elective programs; "related arts," "minicourses," and "activity periods" are just a few. Of this situation, Lounsbury and Vars comment: "Perhaps it is this component of the curriculum that comes closest to mirroring the bewildering transience and diversity of the transescent student."[2]

Names are not particularly important, as long as local educators know what they mean and how their program fits into the total school offering. For the purpose of this monograph, the phrase "exploratory/elective program" will be used to signify the "bridge" area between the core curriculum and the cocurricular program. This area has two distinct purposes: to encourage students to (1) "explore" new areas and (2) learn about "elective" study--about making academic choices.

THE RATIONALE BEHIND THE EXPLORATORY/ELECTIVE PROGRAM

George and Lawrence trace the "exploratory" emphasis of middle level schooling back to the development of the junior high school at the beginning of this century. At that time, this emphasis was designed to give students experience in various academic and vocational areas, so that they could make reasoned choices between the academic, vocational, and general course tracks when they entered high school.[3]

Today, the concept of exploration has a different rationale. Rather than an organizational technique for preparing students for what they will do in high school, exploration is viewed as a way of meeting middle schoolers where they are *now*:

> Middle school educators know that their students have entered a combustive period of their lives, a period of rapid physical growth, intellectual blossoming, tumultuous social and emotional change. It is a time when they begin to see their world in wholly different ways; a time of life when exploration of their many potential selves becomes paramount. The most effective schools for emerging adolescents ought, logically, to be those which recognize and facilitate this process of exploration that is so central to their developmental process. Providing for exploration, then, becomes a primary goal of the fully functioning middle school.[4]

Lounsbury and Vars agree that "exploration is a manifestation of the middle school's commitment to help young people to know themselves, their interests, aptitudes, and capabilities, and to satisfy their natural curiosity and questing.[5]

There are a host of rational statements offered for exploratory/elective programs. The 1987 California Middle Grades

Task Force report, *Caught in the Middle*, asserts that these programs provide students with a "broadened sense of the scope of academic, vocational, and avocational possibilities available to them as adults" and give them opportunities to explore the wide range of academic interests which are beginning to attract their emerging capacity of abstract thought.[6]

John Frank uses the label "cocurricular activities" to include offerings defined here as exploratory/elective courses. He suggests that such programs serve to:

- expand student horizons;
- fill in gaps left by the core program (e.g., there may not be enough drama in the regular English course to satisfy a student interested in theater);
- allow teachers to make use of their special talents and personal interests in teaching special courses; and
- make productive use of what might otherwise be wasted "study hall" time.[7]

Alexander and George agree with these ideas and offer others:

- Exploration in the fine and practical arts develops students' aesthetic appreciation and practical living skills.
- Students get some opportunity to exercise choice and initiative.
- Teachers have more freedom in the design and conduct of these courses.

- Being open to all students, these courses offer a different student mix, exposing students to their peers in other grades and/or ability groups.
- They "help students develop positive interests and activities for leisure time."
- They provide "a necessary creativity outlet for students to meet the adjustment needs for the transitional period between childhood and adolescence."[8]

EXPLORATORY PROGRAMS--A DEFINITION

According to Lounsbury and Vars: "In intermediate schools, the subjects most often classified as exploratory are: music, art, home economics, and industrial arts. These important areas have most typically been provided through required one semester courses at one grade level, with electives available at other grade levels."[9] Often called "Unified Arts," these traditional four subjects form the essence of many programs. However, drama, typing, and foreign language are some other common options for exploratory classes. Even among the "traditional four" new patterns are developing. For example, now that sex segregation in industrial arts and home economics has vanished, Hightstown Intermediate School has fused art, home economics, and industrial arts into an interdisciplinary offering.[10]

Whatever courses are chosen for the exploratory program, certain elements are required to operationalize the concept of "exploration":

- **All students are required to cycle through all courses.** The essence of the exploratory program is to open up new avenues to students--to give them a taste of topics they might not choose for themselves. Hence, every student is exposed to all areas. (There is some argument against requiring exposure of all students, on the premise that today's middle schoolers often learn about some areas outside of school, for example, through television.[11])
- **The exploratory course does not so much teach content as build readiness.** It is very much an *introduction* to a topic, and no one--teacher or student--should expect indepth knowledge or skill mastery. (This may require a change of mind set for some teachers: they may initially find it difficult to teach their specialty on so basic a level.[12])

The "introductory" concept is perhaps easiest to illustrate through a foreign language exploratory model used in the Marion, Indiana, schools. All sixth graders take a nine-week course that combines French, German, and Spanish. They learn some phrases and explore language and cultural concepts. They certainly do not become fluent in any of the three languages, but the course give them a taste of each and, hopefully, motivates them to select one as a full-semester elective in grade 7 or 8.[13]

- **Exploratory courses are open to all.** Unlike some electives, exploratory courses have no prerequisites; they mix students of all academic abilities and English proficiencies.

- **Competitive grading is de-emphasized.** This frees students to explore without fear of failure.[14]

ELECTIVE COURSES

Electives tend to have a more academic bent, including classes in literature, science, mathematics, and social studies.[15] It should perhaps be repeated that, in middle level schools, electives do not replace the core academic courses; rather they supplement the core with added classes of special motivational interest.

Electives may build from the exploratory program. For example, sixth-graders might have an exploratory class in foreign language, followed by traditional French and Spanish electives in grades 7 and 8. Electives may also derive from expressed student interests or needs: an elective might grow out of student enthusiasm for an ecology unit in the regular science class, or a "peer tutor" program may be offered as a service elective.

Unlike exploratory courses, some electives may have prerequisites that limit student participation.[16] Some may offer remedial or advanced work, with students assigned by their teachers based on their regular class performance.[17] Some classes may be designed for students in a particular grade. Others may form a beginning-intermediate-advanced skill sequence, as often happens with foreign language and music performance electives. And still others may have a class size ceiling for practical reasons, such as limited facilities or equipment. However, the

basic concept remains that every student in the school should have access to electives of interest.

Two special modes for presenting electives are minicourses and seminars/independent study.

- **MINICOURSES** Courses of one to twelve weeks in length allow greater flexibility. Students get to take more courses per year, and teacher preparation time for each course is likely to be less. If a school maintains a special class period for the exploratory/elective program, minicourses can vary in length without disrupting the rest of the master schedule.

  Minicourse programs often mix academic and avocational offerings. One Alabama middle school, for example, has offered over 100 minicourse titles, ranging from Speed Math and Classic Books to Band, Chorus, Basic Drawing, Flower Arranging, Chess, Careers, Typing, Bowling, Cheerleading, and Model Airplanes.[18]

  Minicourses may be used in the exploratory program, to cycle students through more "Unified Arts" experiences in a single year[19], or they may be used to offer a larger number of elective topics. Sample elective titles might include: Mark Twain, Mythology, Photography, Rocks and Minerals, the History of Science.[20]

  Offering each student a greater number of brief experiences may be particularly helpful with middle graders who tend to have wide-ranging curiosity but rather short attention spans.

- **SEMINARS/INDEPENDENT STUDY** Independent study is usually reserved for the gifted, but George and Lawrence recommend that all students have regularly scheduled time for choosing their own topics and learning the self-discipline of independent study.[21] The seminar format introduces students to a peer-based form of learning that they are likely to encounter in high school and, particularly, in college.

ACTIVITY PERIODS

Many middle level schools incorporate recreation and sports into the exploratory/elective program, essentially merging it with the cocurricular program. Activities may include hobbies, crafts, dancing, forensics, intramurals, lifetime sports, and games.[22] Called "activity periods" or "special interest activities," they can provide a break in the school day, boost morale, encourage socialization, and introduce youngsters to productive lifetime leisure activities.

The activity period may also be the exploratory/elective period. One Colorado middle school schedules an "Independent Activity Period." Each six weeks a student chooses either independent study, a workshop, or intramurals.[23]

DESIGNING AN EXPLORATORY/ELECTIVE PROGRAM FOR A SCHOOL

Perhaps nowhere else in the middle level program is the concept of school-site planning so important. Much of the academic core is dictated by state and district curriculum guides; the cocurricular program (particularly sports) is often

based on tradition and community expectation; but the exploratory/elective program is essentially free-form and changeable. Staff can decide what exploratory experiences their students need, and students themselves influence the direction of electives by the course selections they make.

Frank recommends that a steering committee of teachers and an administrator design the school's exploratory/elective program. The committee's first task is to determine the goals of the program, against which potential courses can be judged. The committee can then solicit potential course topics through student and teacher interest surveys and a review of teacher capabilities. Once policies are set and the range and content of courses are determined, a "course catalog" can be prepared for distribution to students and their parents.[24]

Frank suggests that program designers pay attention not only to the relevance and quality of each individual course, but also to overall program balance:

> A good program takes into consideration the number of fun offerings, academic spinoffs, hands-on experiences, lifetime carryover values, exploratory experiences, and appropriateness of activities for the age level of students. There should be a sufficient number of activities for all students at all grade levels.[25]

Lounsbury and Vars add that the local community is an important factor in determining program scope: communities that provide their children with private lessons, social activities, and cultural experiences outside school may not need much of an inschool exploratory program, whereas an impoverished community may need a very strong school effort to broaden children's

horizons.[26]

It is generally agreed that all teachers should be involved in teaching exploratory/elective classes. If all teachers take part, the exploratory/elective program will not be seen as a special burden. Indeed, it may be proposed to teachers as a way of capitalizing on their personal talents or interests and as a professional challenge in designing new courses.

- **SCHEDULING** *Caught in the Middle* recommends that the exploratory/elective program average 175 minutes per week, within the regular school day, so that all students can participate.[27] In a seven-period day the "elective period" might share the time slot with another course, one meeting Tuesday and Thursday, the other meeting Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.[28] This time slot might be extended (to perhaps 95 minutes) to accommodate an entire grade (or house): half of the students can take their various exploratory/elective courses first, followed by physical education (or another course), while the other half follows the reverse schedule. Such a schedule can free these students' academic teachers for a lengthy planning period.[29]

  Flexibly-scheduled schools might build a floating period into alternate school days. Often placed at the end of the school day, such a period can accommodate many difficult-to-schedule programs, such as group guidance, study hall, and assemblies.[30]

  Briarcliff (NY) Middle School holds its elective program from 8:45 to 9:30 every morning. Most courses or

activities meet once a week for 13 weeks, meaning that each student is involved in five different exploratory/elective activities during each marking period.[31]

While beginning- or end-of-school-day programs offer distinct advantages, Frank argues for a mid-day period, when the program includes recreational activities. This provides students and teachers with welcome relaxation and a change of pace.[32]

Along with decisions about where in the school day exploratory/elective courses should occur, decisions also need to be made about the length and/or frequency of particular offerings. Minicourses can be of almost any length. Course length is sometimes a function of grade level: for example, a school might offer sixth graders a six-week exploratory experience in art, followed by a nine-week optional minicourse in art for seventh-graders, and a full-semester art elective for eighth graders.[33]

George and Lawrence offer very specific advice about course length:

> A balance between too frequent and too infrequent meetings must be achieved for the program to work. Experience indicates that if the exploratory classes meet on a daily basis, the duration of the classes should not be longer than six weeks and not shorter than three weeks. If the classes meet twice weekly, four to six weeks seems to be an appropriate length, with nine weeks as an appropriate maximum time.[34]

- **STUDENT COURSE SELECTION** Some student class assignments will be automatic, as when all students are assigned heterogeneously to move through a "Unified Arts" cycle or

when certain youngsters are selected by their teachers for remedial coursework. But, as previously noted, a main reason for offering electives is to introduce students to the practice of making their own course selections.

Obviously, parents and teacher advisors will provide a great deal of guidance. (The parent, student, staff communication generated by elective planning can be one of its major benefits.[35]) Further safeguards can be built into the system, as was done at Briarcliff Middle School. Each Briarcliff student selects five different electives per trimester. To ensure that no student slips by on just the "fluff" courses, each offering is weighted: a sport or game is worth one point, a more serious activity is worth two points, and the strongest academic offerings are worth three points. Each trimester, a student must accumulate a "class load" of ten points, which means that he or she must select at least some academic offerings.[36]

- **GRADING** It is generally agreed that some measure of student accountability is necessary if the exploratory/elective program is to be taken seriously.[37] But it also seems agreed that traditional academic grades should be diminished or eliminated in exploratory classes where they might inhibit exploration through fear of failure, especially since these courses may mix students of different ages and abilities. (However, citizenship or behavior ratings may be given as in the core curriculum.[38]) Electives may be graded

as regular academic classes that "count" toward graduation.[39]

- **EXPENSES** One additional consideration in course design is the cost of special equipment or materials. A photography class, for example, requires cameras, film, and processing. Course fees are not considered a good solution since they may prohibit poorer students from participating. Other options are fundraising by students or parents, donations, factory surplus, or auction purchasing.[40]

CONCLUSION

Serving as a bridge between the academic core and the cocurricular program, the exploratory/elective program is uniquely able to address both academic and personal growth in young adolescents. Offerings can range widely, meeting student needs for academic skill development and avocational/social involvement in an interesting and motivating balance. Seminars and concentrated elective courses introduce students to forms of instruction they will meet in high school and college. Arts experiences can develop aesthetic appreciation. "Hands-on" activities, whether practical arts or games, can absorb excess student energy. Relaxing hobbies and crafts can encourage social skills and the productive use of leisure time.

It is in designing such a program that middle school teachers can most directly address the changing needs of their particular students. Less restricted by curriculum mandates than

they are in the core program, teachers can have more scope for exercising their professional creativity. A teacher may develop a course that becomes so valuable it moves into the core curriculum.[41] Thus, the exploratory/elective program can be a laboratory in which both students and teachers can experiment and expand their personal horizons.

REFERENCES

[1] Edward A. Barnhart, "Providing Appropriate Exploratory Programs for Students in the Middle Grades," *ERS Spectrum*, Fall 1987, p17.
[2] John H. Lounsbury and Gordon F. Vars, *A Curriculum for the Middle School Years* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), pp82-83.
[3] Paul George and Gordon Lawrence, *Handbook for Middle School Teaching* (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1982), p149.
[4] George and Lawrence, p149.
[5] Lounsbury and Vars, p83.
[6] *Caught in the Middle* (Sacramento: California State Department of Education, Superintendent's Middle Grade Task Force, 1987), pp9-10.
[7] John Frank, Jr., *Complete Guide to Co-Curricular Programs and Activities for the Middle Grades* (West Nyack, NY: Parker Publishing Company, 1976), pp8,30-31,251.
[8] William M. Alexander and Paul S. George, *The Exemplary Middle School* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981), pp62-64.
[9] Lounsbury and Vars, p87.
[10] Alexander and George, p64.
[11] Frank, p21.
[12] Lounsbury and Vars, p88.
[13] Lael Littlefield and Rafael Grenier, *The Exploratory Wheel: A Foreign Language Program for the Middle School*, ERIC Microfiche Document ED 285 424, pp3-4.
[14] George and Lawrence, p151.
[15] Frank, p18.
[16] *Caught in the Middle*, p6.
[17] Wayne G. Engle and Others, "Something for Everyone--A Successful Elective Program," *Middle School Journal*, August 1982, p3.

[18]Alexander and George, pp64-65.
[19]Littlefield and Grenier, p2.
[20]Alexander and George, pp79,82.
[21]George and Lawrence, pp151-152.
[22]George and Lawrence, p152 AND Frank, pp19,106.
[23]Alexander and George, p66.
[24]Frank, pp137-142.
[25]Frank, p192.
[26]Lounsbury and Vars, p97.
[27]*Caught in the Middle*, p5.
[28]Frank, p217.
[29]Alexander and George, p191.
[30]Alexander and George, p190.
[31]Engle and Others, p3.
[32]Frank, pp219-220.
[33]Lounsbury and Vars, p89.
[34]George and Lawrence, p153.
[35]Engle and Others, p21.
[36]Engle and Others, p21.
[37]George and Lawrence, p153.
[38]Barnhart, p19.
[39]Lounsbury and Vars, p89.
[40]Frank, p194 AND Barnhart, p17.
[41]John J. Gower, "Expanding Electives in the Junior High School," *NASSP Bulletin*, October 1987, p136.

PRACTITIONER'S MONOGRAPH SERIES

The California League of Middle Schools has published the following practitioner's monographs. The price of each monograph is the series is **$4.25 per copy,** which includes California sales tax, shipping, and handling. Your order will be shipped to you within three weeks from the date we receive your order. The following monographs are now available.

1. **Scheduling the Middle Level School: Philosophy Into Practice**
2. **Equal Access to Education: Alternatives to Tracking and Ability Grouping**
3. **Instructional Practices for Middle-level Students: Developing Self-directed Learners**
4. **Supporting Middle Level Students through Counseling and Teacher Advisor Programs**
5. **Cocurricular Activities for Middle Level Schools**
6. **Interdisciplinary Curriculum in the Middle Level School**
7. **Interdisciplinary Team Organization in the Middle Level School**
8. **Exploratory and Elective Courses in the Middle Level School**

- - - -